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The Effects of Neoliberalism and Globalization on Thailand's Sex Industry

Kate Emmons

Abstract

Sex work is a common profession across the globe. In Thailand, the work has been incorporated into society since the early development of the country. With the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and 2008 Global Financial Crisis came the implementation of neoliberal policies, stipulated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. These changes along with increased migration and competition caused by globalization have disproportionately effected women, leading many of them to seek employment in the sex industry. This research aims to break down the ways neoliberalism and globalization have affected the sex industry in Thailand by assessing policies, and nongovernmental intervention.

Keywords: Sex Work, Trafficking, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Neo-colonialism, Nongovernmental Organizations, Empower Foundation, Farming, Familial Obligations, Military

Sex work has been pervasive throughout Thailand since its incorporation into the economy of *the land of smiles*. As neoliberal policies disseminate across the globe, developing countries are exploited for the outsourcing of cheap labor, industrialization replaces the diminishing agricultural sector and privatization booms. Farmers struggle to produce a viable income, resulting in the migration of daughters from villages to urban areas in order to raise money for their families. With a hyper focus on business and a subsequent decrease in social service funding, unemployment rises and desperation stains countries leaving individuals, particularly women, more susceptible to exploitation. Given that sex work is a lucrative profession, many women decide to work in the sex industry. Others, both in Thailand and neighboring countries struggle to find jobs and are unknowingly trafficked into the industry. This research aims to examine how neoliberalism and globalization have negatively influenced the sex industry and analyze which policies are currently contributing to the problem.

It was during the Korean and Vietnam wars that sex work tourism boomed in Thailand. Through the creation of rest and recreation centers located near U.S. military bases, prostitution

friendly zones manifested in Southeast Asia. Author Tono Haruhi explained military personal involvement in her exploration of the industry writing, “in order to relax and enjoy their short vacations after grueling combat, soldiers squandered their dollars on momentary pleasures of Asian women flown over on warplanes to these zones” (Haruhi 1). The migration of women to areas highly populated with sex workers has since become a common occurrence and one that reflects the role Western militarization played in developing the sex industry in Thailand. Semi-formal integration of the labor into the economy arose, “as the international distribution of military personnel shifted and the World Bank began to promote tourism as an engine of development. The Thai state considered prostitution an integral part of its tourist industry. Thus, by the 1970s, sex tourists began to replace soldiers as the principle foreign consumers of sexual services in developing countries” (Simpkins 4). Sparked by a dire need for foreign capital, the state acknowledged that Western visitors already linked the “Thai experience” with sex. Building on the birth of sex tourism developed by the military, infrastructure was expanded and soon the sex industry began to flourish exponentially. As Haruhi argues, this decision represents a “sacrifice of women for the sake of acquiring international wealth” (Haruhi 3). It is this view of devaluing women to produce capital that leads many to believe that prostitution is inherently exploitative.

THE IMF AND WORLD BANK

According to author of *Globalization and its Discontents*, Joseph Stiglitz, globalization has the power to effect both positive and negative change. Standards of living improve, foreign trade allows countries to develop faster, and information outlets are broadened (Stiglitz, 4). However, given how globalization is currently managed, it has not reduced poverty or ensured

stability. Downfalls include environmental degradation, mass unemployment and rapid change that make it challenging for countries to “adapt culturally” (Stiglitz, 8). Stiglitz began working at the World Bank in 1997 under President Bill Clinton. He had high hopes of utilizing his economic background to effectively problem solve. It was not long before he was confronted with the reality of World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) methods. Both institutions developed during World War II and the current leaders are still determined by who was in power at the end of that conflict. “The head of the IMF is always European, that of the World Bank an American” (Stiglitz, 15). The United States is also the only country with effective veto power in the IMF. The IMF is publicly funded and financed by worldwide taxpayers, its mission is to “ensure global economic stability” (Stiglitz, v). It reports not to those who fund it but instead to the banks and ministries of finance around the world. The World Bank provides loans to help countries restructure and develop. In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom and US President Ronald Reagan restructured the institutions themselves by advocating for a free market ideology. Stiglitz argues that the IMF and World Bank do not want to offer perspectives to countries that will allow their democracies to flourish because it nourishes the possibility of opposition. Instead, they cater to the wishes of the G-7, the UK, Canada, France, USA, Japan, Germany and Italy, the most powerful developed countries. An example of self-serving policies can be seen in the IMF

“forcing developing countries to open itself up to imported products that would compete with those produced by certain of its industries, industries that were dangerously vulnerable to competition from much stronger counterpart industries in other countries, can have disastrous consequences—socially and economically” (Stiglitz, 17).

While G-7 countries keep their borders closed to specific imports, they are able, through IMF favoritism, to force developing countries into allowing imports and subsequently boost their own

economy while squashing those of developing nations through market liberalization. This puts extreme pressure particularly on the agricultural sector which cannot survive against rival subsidized goods from the United States or Europe.

FINANCIAL CRISIS

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis marked the rise of neoliberalism in Thailand.

“In July 1997, the Bank of Thailand ended the peg of its currency – the baht – to the American dollar. Its floating exposed the severe overextension of the currency, leaving Thailand, which was already struggling with an unserviceable foreign debt burden, in a crisis of liquidity and near bankruptcy” (Bazbauers, 5).

Recession quickly spread throughout the region. The World Bank believed it could resolve the crisis and presented Thailand with nonnegotiable criteria if the country was to accept aid. The plan entailed the “provision of structural adjustment loans (SALs), underpinned by aggressive neoliberal reforms that demanded fiscal discipline, currency devaluations, high interest rates, bank closures and privatization, the main purpose of all of which was to ensure fiscal contraction and the greater exposure of their economies to market forces” (Bazbauers, 6). In alignment with neoliberal ideology, the SALs neglected to incorporate social service nets or environmental preservation, and in fact stipulated cuts to these sectors. Stiglitz critiques IMF intervention claiming that “excessively rapid financial and capital market liberalization was probably the single most impactful cause of the crisis” (Stiglitz, 89). The IMF had strategically delayed their response to the crisis, allowing Thailand, where the crisis began, and other countries in Southeast Asia to reach a state of desperation before offering support. The motives for this were veiled but ultimately self-serving for the United States. Naomi Klein, author of *The Shock Doctrine*, who

has conducted extensive work on back door economic ploys across the globe, explains, “Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand still had highly protectionist policies that barred foreigners from owning land and from buying out national firms” (Klein, 337). Energy and transportation were still in the public sector and much of foreign imports from Japan, Europe and North America were banned as the countries focused on building their domestic markets. Itching to buy big name corporations in Southeast Asia and access unregulated selling capabilities, the IMF and Wall Street looked on with schadenfreude as the countries unsuccessfully scrambled to save their economies on their own. Jay Pelosky, the Morgan Stanley strategist in 1997 was quoted saying, “I’d like to see the closure of companies and asset sales...Asset sales are very difficult; typically, owners don’t want to sell unless they’re forced to. Therefore, we need more bad news to continue to put the pressure on these corporations to sell their companies” (Klein, 338). When the countries at last sought out IMF aid, they had no idea what was in store.

Primed for an economic restructuring, the SAL package the IMF offered entailed stipulations consisting of free trade, privatization of basic services, and independent central banks. “Thailand would allow foreigners to own large stakes in its banks, Indonesia would cut food subsidies, and Korea would lift its law protecting workers against mass layoffs” (Klein, 340). In Korea, suicides swept the country as older generations killed themselves to lessen the financial burden of their children. The framework had the opposite effect as the countries had hoped for in terms of rebuilding their economies. In the three decades prior to the 1997 crisis, Asia was dubbed the “East Asia Miracle” because the region had “not only grown faster and done better at reducing poverty than any other region of the world, developed or less developed, but it had also been more stable” (Stiglitz, 90). When the market learned Asia had been

prescribed a gutting and rebuilding, traders pulled out even more money than when they initially heard whispers of Asia's impending crisis, believing the situation to be much worse than reality. Later, when the reforms failed, the IMF blamed the countries for not taking implementation seriously and claimed there were fundamental problems. This compelled another round of foreign investors to pull out money from the economies, further limiting the inflow of capital. The IMF also instructed Thailand to cut back on their trade deficit and expand their trade surplus. In order to achieve this, there were two options: either implement trade tariffs to decrease imports, devalue the currency to make the countries own goods cheaper and increase exports or "reduce imports by cutting incomes, inducing a major recession" (Stiglitz, 108). Due to the domino effect of the crisis, neighboring countries took a similar approach, limiting their imports and causing a general decrease in exports. While the fiscal policies allowed for increased trade surpluses, "giving the country the resources to pay back foreign creditors," it came at the expense of their citizen's standard of living (Stiglitz, 108). The IMF and World Bank prescribed policies that had proven to fail in other contexts. Rapid market liberalization with no pre-established social security nets decimated the previously stable foundation. Political leaders in Thailand allegedly knew what reforms they needed to enforce but were too fearful of the discontinuation of foreign investment to pass up IMF and World Bank support. The neoliberal policies contributed to an intensified and prolonged crisis.

The IMF forced Southeast Asia to increase interest rates to be fifty times greater. The justification was that high interest rates would attract capital flow into the country, help support the exchange rate and stabilize the currency. At the time, many firms in East Asia were indebted. The IMF was well aware of this and also knew that high interest rates often cause highly leveraged companies to go bankrupt forcing them to pay large sums to creditors. Banks were

weakened as they faced an upturn in nonperforming loans. The IMF had argued the interest rates would restore market confidence but in reality, the economies were left in shambles.

“In Thailand, for instance, it was already the bankrupt real estate firms and those that lent to them who had the most foreign denominated debt. Further devaluations might have harmed the foreign creditors but would not have made these firms any more dead. In effect, the IMF made the small businesses and other innocent bystanders pay for those who had engaged in excessive dollar borrowing – and to no avail” (Stiglitz, 111).

High interest rates caused distress for corporations and banks. Ignoring this downside of the IMF’s “stabilization” policies, teams were sent to East Asia to close weak banks. “The IMF insisted that banks either shut down” or achieve capital adequacy a term that describes bank’s ratio of capital to their loans (Stiglitz, 116). To do so, banks needed to cut back on loans or increase capital. Many banks were shut down and those that remained decreased their lending and refused to give out loans to new clients. Without access to credit, the capital needed to meet corporation’s day to day production requirements could not be met. Production rates lowered and loans could not be paid back since expansion was impossible. The economies were stunted and corporations paralyzed. Local and international funders moved their investments from Southeast Asia’s dying market to the thriving market of the United States.

Southeast Asia’s currencies plummeted. Debt increased and unemployment rates skyrocketed as mass firing occurred. “Thailand was losing 2,000 jobs a day at the height of ‘reforms’ – 60,000 a month” (Klein, 344). The IMF’s Independent Evaluation Office concluded the adjustments were too severe, unjustifiable and ultimately ineffective. Women and children bore the brunt of the crisis, many of whom were sold to traffickers or became prostitutes in order to generate an income for their families. “In Thailand, public health officials reported a 20

percent increase in child prostitution in just one year—the year after the IMF reforms” (Klein, 344). While Southeast Asia had been further wounded, Wall Street flourished as U.S. security and investment firms purchased Asian companies in a mad rush to penetrate the countries business sectors.

In 2008, the Global Financial Crisis further destabilized Southeast Asia. However, reflecting upon their previous, failed intervention, the World Bank presented provisions that instead of “helping” the country *resolve* the crisis as in 1997, would allow the country to *endure* the crisis. This was in part due to the reshaping of the World Bank that took place in 1999 under President James Wolfensohn. He announced a shift away from the “Washington Consensus” neoliberal model prescribed by the United States Treasury Department, the IMF, and the World Bank and implemented the Comprehensive Development Framework. The goal was to offer holistic aid geared towards both the market and social sector. SALs were replaced with development policy loans (DPLs). They were “designed to disburse emergency finance rapidly, DPLs guided institutional actions, improved investment climates, strengthened governance sectors, created employment opportunities, modernized education programs, built social safety nets, and developed climate change policy frameworks” (Bazbauers, 7). Despite the conscious shift towards comprehensive support, the World Bank still advocates for privatization and deregulation meaning it remains the leading neoliberal development institution.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

Thailand’s transition from agrarianism was an economic structural change that arose from neoliberal economic policies and the pressures of globalization. The shift away from sustenance-based agriculture to industrialization created an economic boom for the country.

Author of *Localism in Thailand*, Kevin Hewison, explored the environmental and social effects of the industry change. When Thailand was still agriculturally focused, the country witnessed one of the highest growth rates globally from 1987 to 1997 (Hewison 6).

“In 1960 agriculture accounted for about 40 percent of GDP, most exports, and employed more than 80 percent of the population. By 1997 just 48 percent worked in agriculture, some 35 percent of GDP was attributable to manufacturing, and industrial growth saw manufactured exports expand from one percent of total exports in 1960 to 80 percent by the mid-1990s” (Hewison 6).

When the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 occurred, the government of Thailand agreed to adopt the stabilizing measures proposed by the IMF such as, “(initially) tight monetary policy, increased financial liberalisation, greater economic openness and foreign investment, and the reform of public and private governance” (Hewison 9). With the adoption of neoliberal policies came a new dialogue of individualism. The system was not at fault, instead it was the individual who determined whether they achieved success or not. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, beloved by the country, refocused on self-sustaining agricultural measures but perpetuated the controversial individualist mindset when addressing industrialization. “While he pointed to agriculture, arguing the importance of ‘having enough to eat ... enough to get by on’, he also applied this to factories, where self-sufficiency was seen to involve lower wages and benefits for workers during the crisis” (Hewison 11). Hewison argues that it is the encouragement of Western consumerism that has fueled such inequitable practices. Production for the sake of industrial and agricultural exportation as instructed by the West has been detrimental to the rural economy. “Production for the market and export, the introduction of cash crops, land clearing, and the use

of Western concepts in farming are seen as responsible for ‘food shortage, low production, financial loss and indebtedness’” (Hewison 12). With development came the demise of subsistence farming and a new wave of farming for profit. Since then, most farmers have had to invest in larger plots, and instead of tending to the land by foot, now need machines, motorcycles, and modern technology. Modernizing farming also lead to the utilization of pesticides which have harmful effects on the local species and sources of food such as fish, frogs and shrimp; pesticides were introduced in order to meet market standards (Sorajjakool, 6). As opposed to farming to feed the family and selling excess goods in the market, farmers now must invest if they want to survive and compete. The expanding gap between pesticide costs and yield along with the cost of technology and land rental results in increased debt.

Used of Chemical Fertilization

1971	128,139 Tons
1982	321,700 Tons
1999	1,763,028 Tons
2007	3,400,000 Tons

(Sorajjakool,16)

“According to Kanoksak Kaewthep in 1965 34.8% of products were agricultural and 22.7%, industrial. In 1995, 10.3% were agricultural while 39.5% were industrial. Since 1989 to 2009, the number of Thai farmers dropped from 67% to less than 40%. In 2008, the average debt per family was 107, 230 baht. 80% of farmers are in debt and have difficulty repaying. 60% of farmers have to rent land for farming. There are 546, 942 agricultural families without land and 969,355 families with insufficient land for farming. On average 90% of farmers own one rai of land while 10% of farmers own 200 rai. Between 2007 and 2008, farm rental has gone up 2-4 times. This figure is not surprising when taken within the context of the economic policy of neo-liberalism. Since the

initiation of this economic policy, the income gap has increased dramatically”
(Sorajjakool, 17).

The further indebted farmers become, the more urgent it is to send daughters to metropolitan areas to raise funds for the family, many of whom became sex workers. Involvement in the sex industry isn't considered controversial by families, if anything, it is encouraged since the profession is more lucrative than most. The normalization of the sexual pilgrimage for money stems from the desperation caused by the cyclical, exploitative agenda of neoliberalism.

CULTURAL CONTRIBUTORS

From the Ayutthaya period to the early 1780s, the Sakdina system was in place, a numerical process that determined one's ranking in society. Through this system “men were allowed three categories of wives: a wife from an arranged marriage, a wife that the men chose for love, and slave mistress” (Chai, 9). Third-tier wives were not considered “morally reprehensible” since it was understood that the women sought out wealthy partnerships for financial mobility (Chai, 10). At times, the role was seen as honorable because the women were sacrificing for the sake of providing for their families. The practice ended after slavery was abolished under King Rama V in 1905 and the former mistresses were left without dependable “employment.” The state “imposed an imported legal framework that exists in disjuncture with the operations of the socioeconomic system” (Chai, 10). As Chinese immigrants flooded the country, the center of prostitution shifted to the Chinese district where three main brothels were established. The industry boomed with the influx of American GIs traveling for R&R in Bangkok's Pattaya district. Prostitution was eventually made illegal in 1960. “The state's role in the sex industry went through three eras: the Sakdina era where third-tier wives were sanctioned by the state, the constitutional era where the state turned a blind eye, and the post-Sarit era where

the state criminalized the industry” (Chai, 10). Migration from rural to urban areas for the sake of sex work was a common thread throughout all phases. While the practice of having third-tier slave wives was abolished due to pressures to modernize, the general public seems to remain unfazed in regard to prostitution. The overwhelming sentiment is empathetic and understanding of the motives behind the job.

Vast quantities of Thai women have migrated for sex work. According to a 1998 study, “between 2 and 300,000 women, most of whom come from rural parts of the country, are employed in the sex industry; this means that at least one of every 100 working women is a sex worker” (Simpkins, 1). Such extensive involvement by Thai women would be nonexistent without the upholding of traditional, gendered expectations in Thailand. “When women are prevented from obtaining higher education, or even vocational training, for all intents and purposes they are excluded from the more highly skilled and highly paid occupations” (Piper, 6). In Thailand, for example, a son's education is regarded as more important and “it is common to find that a son's education is supported not by parents but by a daughter who has migrated to the city or even abroad to work as a prostitute” (Piper, 6). Similar iterations of gender roles and power dynamics are seen amongst Thai men and Thai prostitutes. “Part of the explanation for Thai male consumption of sexual services lies in the local cultural history of gender relations: elite men have historically engaged in polygamy and commercial sexual relations” (Simpkins, 8). It is this previous promotion of polygamy that fosters acceptance of sex work. The ingrained, cultural gender expectations and subsequent disparities dominate the decision making when it comes to women's sex work. It is perhaps not seen as exploitative but expected to have women available and payable for intercourse.

Familial obligation is the main reason women find themselves in the sex industry. In Thai culture, children are obligated to dedicate their lives to repaying their parents for bringing them into the world. Some Westerners may scorn Thai society for promoting prostitution but individuals are not ridiculed for taking on the role. One study found that instead, “it was only those who failed to send money home or were unsuccessful financially that were stigmatized as selfish, thereby suggesting that prostitution itself was not considered morally indefensible or even inherently corrupting to teenage girls. It was the lack of success as a prostitute that was negatively viewed” (Montgomery, 4). The pressure of providing for ones’ family can lead children and women to bypass other jobs. Not only is the financial gain far superior to a minimum wage job, but many sex workers find the conditions more manageable. “In purely economic terms selling sex was seen as a sensible choice and was viewed as being less physically arduous than other forms of labour” (Montgomery, 5). A woman mentioned in Heather Montgomery’s article, *Eight: Focusing on the Child, Not the Prostitute*, expanded on the benefits of sex work noting, “I had a very good income, worked short hours, indoors, it wasn’t hot, I could shop with my friends during the day, and my skin stayed white. I don’t really think it was bad” (Montgomery, 5). The network of those benefitting from sex workers in Thailand is wide spread. It is reported that, “more than 1.2 million people (out of a total population of 56 million people) are financially connected to sex work” (Simpkins, 1). It is evident that a significant portion of Thai society is dependent on the economic gain of sex work and that this reliance has served to justify the encouragement of women’s involvement or their voluntary engagement with the industry. Culturally, sex work is not looked down upon but globally, perceptions of the morality of the job vary. It is this variance that spurs anti-prostitution intervention from the United States through globalization.

SEX WORK VS. SEX TRAFFICKING

The differentiation between sex work and sex trafficking must be distinguished before an adequate address of the sex industry can be made. Often, the two are conflated, spurring the misconception that sex work is synonymous with sex trafficking.

“The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2006) defines trafficking in persons as ‘the recruitment, transportation, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation’” (Peerapeng, Chaitip, Chaiboonsri, Kovacs & Balogh, 1).

Sex work is considered to be voluntary, in that women are not participating under a false pretense. Many authors argue that globalization has led to an increase in both voluntary and coerced involvement in the industry. With the expansion of free trade, increased flow of capital and cheaper foreign labor comes the frequent movement of bodies across and within borders. Globalization has “created new opportunities for exploitation. The contradiction in wealth between neighboring countries is attractive to those wanting to escape poverty” (Peerapeng et al, 1). Traffickers are eager to “assist” those who wish to migrate. The authors note that human trafficking is not an outcome of globalization but a part of the process, because the integration of widespread economic activities is central to the ideology. Globalization creates space for women to be trafficked and heightens the demand for cheap labor, driving down pricing and making sex work an attractive outlet for higher pay that is unregulated by foreign companies or the government.

Author of Sex Trafficking in Southeast Asia How Neo-liberalism has Bolstered the Global Sex Trade, Adrienne Sanders, believes that all engagement in the sex industry in Southeast Asia is human trafficking, not empowering or optional. This is due to the exploitation caused by neoliberalism and the financial disenfranchisement that leads women to the industry, not by choice but by circumstance. “Neo - liberalism does not offer the political and economic freedoms promised but rather imprisons poorer countries into ‘hierarchical relationship[s] that [exist] between the developing countries and dependent countries and between men and women’” (Sanders 5). Consequently, women are confined to subordinate positions within society. With the enactment of the third pillar of neoliberalism, privatization, Southeast Asia experienced high levels of unemployment and an increase in labor exploitation due to the desperation for jobs. This, in conjunction with the 1997 Asian financial crisis, after which women were the first to be fired, resulted in women being sold into the sex trade (Sanders 7). There is a general devaluing of the bodies of women who are of lower-socio economic standing in relation the collapse of the economy and hyper-focus on its rebuilding.

THE VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING AND VIOLENCE PROTECTION ACT (TVPA)

The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) was amended in 2000. It is the first trafficking law in the United States and has a global reach that influences relations between the United States and other countries. The law defines ‘severe forms of trafficking in persons’ as understood within the categories of sex and labor. Sex trafficking occurs when, “a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or when the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (Mollema, p.6). Labor exploitation is also covered in the act as it manifests in the private and public sector in the form of domestic and

agricultural work. Under the TVPA, labor exploitation is defined as, “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labour or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (Mollema, p.6). Under the 2000 version of the TVPA, a ranking system was developed for foreign countries to determine whether they are actively combatting trafficking in all forms. The ranking system was intended to place government action in one of four categories:

“Tier 1: If they are making major efforts and are largely succeeding

Tier 2: If they are making significant efforts with mixed results

Tier 2 Watch List: If they are making some efforts with limited visible impact

Tier 3: Reserved for governments making negligible efforts” (Lagon, 2011, p.3).

Countries face economic and humanitarian sanctions from the United States if they are on the Tier 2 Watch List or in Tier 3. The President may withhold non-humanitarian, non-trade related assistance. Involvement in educational and cultural exchange can be halted. The United States President can also advise the IMF to deny loans.

The United States can be commended for implementing an act that aims to address trafficking, however, there is a lack of self-criticism and reflection regarding the ways the U.S. contributes to the human trafficking economy. “As of 2010, the US department of State estimated that there were more than 12 million victims of trafficking globally” (Avdan, p.3). Individuals residing in poor communities are more likely to be recruited as most “push” factors are related to lack of economic opportunity fueled by globalization’s broadening of the wealth gap between rich and poor countries. Furthermore, outsourcing and the International Monetary Fund’s pressure on countries to accept foreign factories if they want to be recipients of loans has led to a “rise in power of international institutions focused on markets relative to those concerned

with sustainable human development” causing the burden to fall heavily on women as laborers (Chuang, p.6). Neoliberal policies, founded on the idea that expansion and economic, international relations can only occur if countries focus on capital gain and decrease investment in social welfare, have disproportionately affected women. “The subsidization of social services continually dwindles under neoliberal globalization, deconstructing the provisory shelter women have from the constraints of global capitalist patriarchy and the male biases of market competition and individualism” (Sander 1). Countries with foreign debt or high unemployment rates favor foreign investment from international corporations and sacrifice labor standards for contracting opportunities. As jobs in one’s country of origin disappear or become limited to sweatshops and other inhumane labor, workers are compelled to migrate for better standards of living and working conditions. Some economic restructuring policies also result in the trimming of social service programs forcing women to seek work in unregulated jobs, making them susceptible to trafficking. Also, “political factors such as domestic strife and political repression as well as environmental disasters and famine may push migrants out of source countries” (Avdan, p.5). The initial decision to migrate is typically a conscious act of survival-migration.

The primary “pull” factor is labor shortage in wealthier countries due to an aging population or citizens unwillingness to work in the unskilled sector. Women are disproportionately vulnerable to trafficking because of the “feminization of poverty.” Since women face discrimination and limited access to resources because of their gender, they are inherently disadvantaged and therefore more willing to flee. Furthermore, “employers favor migrant domestic workers over local domestic workers because of their vulnerability and lack of choice that results from their foreign status” (Chuang, p.9). The United States has undeniably influenced trafficking in Thailand because of their strategic insertion into the economy during

the 1997 and 2008 crisis.

The stress of appealing to the United States and adequately ranking under the TVPA system as to not lose funding and maintain good relations has had a damaging effect on sex workers in Thailand. Each country's ranking is shared publicly in the Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP). As representative and author of the TVPA, Chris Smith explained, the goal is to embarrass countries with low rankings (Smith). Thailand's status had fluctuated over the years. In 2008 and 2009, the country was in Tier 2. From 2010-2013 Thailand was on the Tier 2 Watch List. In 2014 and 2015 they sunk to Tier 3. In 2016 and 2017, the government made it back to the Tier 2 Watch List and in 2018, the country qualified once more for Tier 2 status. The sex workers at Empower Foundation, a sex worker run organization in Thailand, thoroughly researched the effects of the trafficking laws on their communities, authoring a book titled *Hit and Run II* that covers the timeline of US engagement with trafficking. During the 2001-2009 presidency of George W. Bush, anti-prostitution lobbyists were joined by Catholic fundamentalists who, backed by the United States, preached an abolitionists agenda abroad, believing all sex work to be exploitative (Empower Foundation, 22). When the UN Trafficking Protocol was drafted, sex workers requested the word 'prostitution' not be included since sex work is "the exchange of sexual services for payment, in cash or kind" and trafficking is, "the forced coercion of women and children into sexual exploitation" (Empower Foundation, 23). Given that the law covers trafficking, there was no need to include prostitution. Unfortunately, when the protocol was enacted in 2000, prostitution was cited as a form of trafficking and was not clearly defined, leaving it up for subjectivity. "The Bush Administration...in 2004 implemented a policy (which remains in place today) whereby any organization worldwide who received US funding for HIV/AIDS prevention, must sign "the Pledge" and follow a mandate to

actively oppose any legalization or acceptance of sex work” (Empower Foundation, 23). This makes it challenging for NGOs attempting to support sex workers to receive funding as they are competing with rescue organizations who promote anti-trafficking agendas. Many anti-trafficking organizations are subsequently being funded to deploy on Christian conversion missions.

NGOs

An integral part of globalization and neoliberalism is the dissemination of Western ideology. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) both religious and secular are a pivotal part of the rehabilitation economy of sex workers and trafficking victims. Foreign modes of intervention are often backed by religious views that conflict with dominant Buddhist beliefs. Given the Buddhist tradition of merit-making, sex work is not stigmatized in Thai culture. “In other words, rather than being eternally perceived as "fallen women" as in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, sex workers can become something else later in life, and actually make merit in the present by giving their earnings to others” (Simpkins, 3). Author Elana Shih describes the anti-trafficking rehabilitation complex of Western NGOs explaining that they are dependent on a victim narrative to make a profit. Often, women are removed from the industry and enrolled in vocational trainings that offer them jobs making jewelry, working in cafes, bakeries or other businesses owned by the organization. The products and facilities, displayed as being created or run by former sex victims, are typically marketed as supporting their “freedom.” Moral rehabilitation is also a crux of the formula, with women forced to dissociate from the industry in order to take part in the NGO’s programs. Aid and profit are therefore dependent on the display of women as victims. Shih interviewed Yan, a Chinese woman who had been a sex worker in

Beijing for five years before being recruited by a Christian NGO. She writes, “Yan and most of her co-workers don’t consider themselves victims of trafficking, but the NGO that employs them does because they consider all sex work to be inherently exploitative, and this indistinguishable from human trafficking” (Shih, 21). The framework utilized by said NGOs also fails to implement long-term alternatives to sex work. After three-years of making jewelry, Yan left the organization and unsuccessfully sold jewelry on her own. She had not developed a viable financial alternative. The jobs “generate income for NGOs and privilege the perspective of First World rescuers. Rather than rescue, sex workers have long asked for enforcement of policies around employer accountability, measures for health and safety, and protection from police abuse” (Shih, 22). While many organizations offer STD screenings, spa days and English classes for free for sex workers, the women must embrace the stigmatization of their work as “undignified” in order to fully partake in employment programs. The pressure to adopt a demoralizing view of oneself, paired with temporal solutions that create a dependency on the NGO calls into question the morality and effectiveness of the organizations themselves.

In the summer months of 2018, I traveled to Thailand to intern and conduct independent research. I met with various individuals ranging from sex workers, a policewoman, professor and anti-trafficking NGO members. In late May, I ventured to the streets of Nana Sukhumvit, a redlight district in Bangkok, to tour the facilities of a Christian run, rescue NGO. The organization has developed relations with local bars and massage parlors, often sending outreach teams to visit sex workers at night. Occasionally, employers are skeptical about allowing the teams in, afraid they may poach their employees and persuade them to leave the industry. The fear stems from prior instances of NGOs renting all the women from a bar for parties in order to talk them into leaving the industry and causing the bar to have no employees for the evening.

The NGO has strategically developed relationships with the managers of each facility which allow them to come into the spaces at night to speak with the workers. The teams, which set out once a week, are comprised solely of women and are specialized in terms of their target, bars or massage parlors with high rates of trafficked foreigners or Thai women. Many managers are persuaded to permit the outreach visitation because their business benefits from employee engagement in NGO services. This specific organization offers some services to those who remain sex workers such as free monthly medical check with a doctor and English language classes offered once a week. It is better for business if workers can say with assurance that they are STD free and also be able to negotiate adequately with foreigners. Workers are allowed to enjoy the Beauty Shop, a free spa day at which they can be pampered at the NGO and connect with one another twice a week. However, if they wish to enjoy the other services such as alternative employment opportunities, medical insurance and additional courses in accounting, management and public relations, the women must agree to leave the sex industry. The organization aims to intervene and enable sexually exploited women and children to discover their dignity and empower them to work in their community. When I asked why they deem sex work undignified and don't consider it legitimate labor in the community, the organization requested to no longer be involved in my research. If women agree to their terms of participation, they are provided financial alternatives in the form of jewelry making, working at the organization's coffee shop, screen printing shirts, helping at the daycare or working in the NGO run bakery.

According to the manager of the organization's coffee shop, the majority of women rescued by the group are trafficking victims from other countries such as Africa, Columbia and Central Asia. The organization also offers their services to victims in detention centers who are

waiting to be sent home. The NGO fundraises to cover the cost of repatriation, assists with paperwork and also connects the women to NGOs in their home country capable of offering housing and job training. The organization allows for tours of the facility to discuss the work of the group, showcase their successful coffee shop and see if visitors are interested in volunteering. While on my tour, I was joined by three Russian tourists, all of whom were Christian and eager to partake in prison ministry in order to speak with Russian sex trafficking victims. The organization visits the Immigration Detention Center in Bangkok to hear the stories of trafficked women who have overstayed their visas, offer words of support, share bible passages and provide toiletries. The tour guide described the process of open visitation. One hundred or so detainees stand against a wall while visitors stand shoulder to shoulder opposite them, multiple meters behind chain link fences. They shout to one another for anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour. The amount of information exchanged is contingent on whether those around you are projecting loudly, or not.

Eager to know about outreach beyond prison visitations, one of the tourists asked, “When you send outreach teams to the bars, do you tell them immediately that God loves them?” “We generally try not to lead with the God card,” our tour guide replied. When women take the NGO up on their offer to leave the industry and accept a job, they know they are entering a faith-based group. Everyone is accepted regardless of their religious background or lack thereof. “We love to pray with the women and seek the best for them,” the café manager explained. “Nothing is forced on them. We do have bible study with the women.” After descending the steps of the multiple story building, equipped with conference rooms and community spaces, we ran into two black women working in the café. “Are they former sex workers?” one of the Russians whispered to our tour guide. “Umm... yes,” he replied hesitantly. “God loves you!” the woman

exclaimed, taking their hands in hers. The employee sighed. Unamused she glanced at her friend and replied, “we know.”

Empower Foundation is the most notable sex worker run group in Thailand. Created in 1984, they are a sex worker organization that over the past 33 years has had 50,000 members including individuals from Thailand, “and migrant sex workers mainly from Mekong countries such as Laos, Burma, China, and Cambodia” (Empower Foundation, ii). I met five of the women, four of whom were sex workers, one a British woman named Liz, in charge of communication, at the organization’s bar in Chiang Mai. We sat around a picnic table in the kitchen, sticky air wafting in from the alleyway. The women ranged from their twenties to mid-forties. All were the head of their households, responsible for sustaining their families and making the financial decisions, most of them had children. Nam, who came to Empower seven years ago to learn English, Thai and work at the CanDo bar said, “sex work gives us more time, especially for our children during the day. Most sex workers in Thailand.... 80% are moms. If we are working in other jobs, we just have to follow orders. With this job, we can be more independent.” The women nodded their heads in agreement, echoing that sex work was decent work. Mai commented, “It [sex work] is common for everybody. They have already done so many of the other jobs available already. You learn a lot from sex work. We get to see a wider world because we meet men from all over the world.” Ping Pong, the oldest of the group felt it fit her personality better than factory work. She could spend hours flirting and talking and found it easier to manage safe sex compared to when she was married. Their families know what they do for a living and respect them for providing. “We come from the working and poor class. We are working to get the whole family out of poverty and up to the next level which no other job can do. If we can get our family out of poverty or the poor class, then that is the future of many

generations.” To work with the collective incentive of creating economic mobility for a generation is an undisputedly honorable goal.

When sex work is discussed, it is commonly justified as labor because it is “empowering.” It seems to be an easy way to gain support. Why would you not want someone to feel liberated? Justifying sex work on the grounds that it allows one to support their families, has convenient hours and is enjoyable for some feminists isn’t enough to compel public support. However, Liz debunked this myth during our two-hour interview. “Sex work isn’t empowering it’s a job for fucks sake. You can ask people but only a small number will say it is. Most will say that it allows for more freedom but is not empowering.” Shedding this narrative allows for a nuanced understanding of the work. Synonymous with other labor, it is transactional, it can be pleasurable and the goal of profiting incentivizes action.

While the foundation facilitates engagement in the industry and provides spaces for women to meet clients they also support sex workers through a myriad of educational programs. In 2005 the Rockefeller Foundation partnered with Empower Foundation to create Empower College. Nine centers were developed in four provinces in Thailand. Themes of each campus range from political strategy, migration studies, small business studies, occupational health, and more. In Chiang Mai, a study area resides above the CanDo bar. It is here that sex workers flock to learn. The Foundation provides daily computer classes, English and Thai language courses, and leadership development along with opportunities to speak at international and national meetings. Short skill courses are offered every month at all Empower centers based on interest. Women learn by doing and can take courses on topics such as candle making, self-defense and condoms. Sex workers do not have to work at the bar to access the services.

When asked about the role of NGOs with rescue missions, the women responded critically. I referenced my interview with the Bangkok organization, retelling their conflation of sex work with trafficking, an act that strips workers of their agency and pride. What do you think about NGOs that try to remove women from the industry? I asked. “We have never seen it as help. We see it as an abuse of our rights,” Mori said. “We don’t need that kind of help,” Mai responded. She and Nam agreed that it is a business. Mai referenced an organization from Colorado that offers 45,000 baht (\$1,400) rescue tours, allowing tourists to accompany NGO members on rescue trips in red light districts to persuade sex workers to seek alternative employment. Upon researching, I discovered a Colorado based NGO named Paladin Rescue Alliance that takes tourists to three cities in Thailand- Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Mae Sariang to “conduct outreach in bars and parlors to connect with victims and provide sustainable job opportunities” (Team Trips). Tourists also complete service projects, speak to students in partner schools and get to enjoy cultural events in Thailand all for the cost of \$2,300. The organization’s logo is a knife and shield, the imagery associated with noble knights. The graphic serves as a visual for the white savior complex that these NGOs perpetuate. Given that these organizations don’t differentiate between trafficking victims and self-elected sex workers, they approach anyone who appears to be in the industry. For some of the women, the work is noble for they are providing for their families. They have created a community, and they look forward to the labor. To be repeatedly approached by missionaries and told that people are praying for them, that they can escape this life and do better is infuriating and can be damaging to one’s sense of self-worth. It is a form of neo-colonialism. “The NGOs that are getting money to do rescue work and help the government get to Tier 1-2 has nothing to do with helping women’s lives,” Mai replied. “We feel like we are a tool for other people’s needs. The government needed to go up on the TIP

report so we can be the indicator. People need to show that they are helping so we become their indicator. The media needs a good story so we become that. The department of tourism needs more tourism....” Mori trailed off. “At the moment, our bodies belong to the government,” Mai said. “At least our customers pay and respect our bodies,” Ping Pong added.

Sex work is tightly bound to the state of the economy. As seen in this case study of Thailand, pressures from the United States have negatively impacted sex workers. They are criminalized under anti-trafficking laws, making it challenging for them to receive protection under the law and access employment benefits. This is in part a result of the TVPA and ranking system developed by the United States and migration as a result of neoliberal policies and globalization. A national market that is thriving more than neighboring countries prompts an increase in immigrants and trafficking to that country. Due to industrialization, agrarian families that can no longer rely on individual production are particularly susceptible to trafficking. They are also more willing to send their daughters to work in urban environments. Outsourcing, a result of neoliberalism and globalization, has created a cheap labor industry, and made sex work, a job with fewer hours and higher pay, an appealing alternative. The combination of familial pressures on women to provide for their families along with the state of labor in Thailand, shaped by international policies, contributes to the high number of individuals employed by the sex industry. Despite the cultural support of sex work, Western influence of laws and NGO funding has created safety barriers for women who are willingly engaged in the industry. The actions of Western institutions fail to consider the cultural climate of Thailand and their role in creating wealth disparities in the region through self-serving intervention. Subsequently, most forms of funded and encouraged responses harm workers in the sex industry.

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